



<b>Title</b>	<b>Childhood Bilingualism in the Chinese Context</b>
<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Yip, V; Matthews, SJ</b>
<b>Citation</b>	<b>The 9th International Symposium on Bilingualism (ISB-9), Singapore, 10-13 June 2013.</b>
<b>Issued Date</b>	<b>2013</b>
<b>URL</b>	<b><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10722/191139">http://hdl.handle.net/10722/191139</a></b>
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# Childhood bilingualism in the Chinese context

**Virginia Yip<sup>1&2</sup> and Stephen Matthews<sup>1&3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Childhood Bilingualism Research Centre, Chinese University of Hong Kong

<sup>2</sup>Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages, Chinese University of Hong Kong

<sup>3</sup>Department of Linguistics, University of Hong Kong



香港中文大學  
語言學及現代語言系  
*Department of Linguistics and Modern Languages*  
*The Chinese University of Hong Kong*



香港大學  
**THE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG**



兒童雙語研究中心  
Childhood Bilingualism Research Centre

The 9th International Symposium on Bilingualism

<sup>1</sup> Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

10 - 13 June 2013



# Outline

- Childhood bilingualism and language shift in the Chinese context.
- Bilingual development in 2 groups of Hong Kong bilingual children in our longitudinal studies:
  - (a) one parent-one language families
  - (b) one parent-two language families
- Bilingual education in early childhood
- Conclusions and recommendations



# Common queries among early childhood educators and parents

- Bilingualism as burden:  
“Two languages may be too much for my child”
- Preference for sequential bilingualism:  
“Let’s wait until her English is established first, then we can teach her Chinese”





# Our view as linguists

- Parents who delay exposing children to both languages on the grounds that it will be a burden for them are under a misapprehension.
- When the input conditions are favorable, we encourage **simultaneous language acquisition**, (Yip 2013) i.e. learning two or more languages in tandem and thus achieve bilingual competence in early childhood.

# Maintaining bilingualism in Hong Kong and Singapore

- Both Hong Kong and Singapore face the challenge of maintaining bilingualism:  
more and more families shifting to English
- Language shift in Singapore (Lee 2013):
  - from Chinese dialects and Mandarin
  - from Mandarin to English
- Gradual loss of Chinese (Lee 2012)
- Emergence of English-dominant bilinguals

# 15 MOE kindergartens to set quality standards

New numeracy, literacy schemes will also help weaker students

By SANDRA DAVIE  
SENIOR EDUCATION CORRESPONDENT

FIFTEEN government-run kindergartens will be set up over the next three years in Housing Board estates, with the first five opening in January next year.

These kindergartens, sited at primary schools or in community spaces, will use the latest research in early childhood education to develop the best teaching methods and practices.

These would then be shared with other pre-schools to spur improvements all round.

The admission criteria, details on number of places and locations will be released in two weeks.

This is the latest and, as some pre-school experts say, "most significant" in a series of recent measures to lift standards in the pre-school sector.

The Ministry of Education (MOE) and the Ministry of Social and Family Development have over the years raised the baseline qualifications of principals and teachers, developed and disseminated curriculum resources, and introduced a quality accreditation framework for pre-school centres.

During the debate on his ministry's budget yesterday, Education Minister Heng Swee Keat said MOE is prepared to go beyond these 15 centres. But it will study if indeed they create significant value for parents and children.

He said the Government is pushing for quality in the pre-school sector as it builds a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

But MOE will not stop there, said Mr Heng as he went on to announce literacy and numeracy programmes aimed at weaker students in primary and secondary schools, right up to post-secondary in the Institute of Technical Education.

Currently, there is the Learning Support Programme (LSP) in English and mathematics at the lower primary level for those lagging behind in those subjects.

The new schemes, starting from Primary 1, will cater to those who do not qualify for the LSP

## LEVELLING UP

Various schemes will be set up to help students build a good foundation



### PRE-SCHOOL

- 15 government-run kindergartens to be set up over the next three years in HDB heartlands.
- Information on admission and locations will be out in two weeks.
- About 100 more kindergartens to get a literacy programme.

Left: Renee Lim, four, will get more kindergarten options next year.

### PRIMARY / SECONDARY

- 60,000 students to get help in English and maths each year.
- New programmes, such as small-group coaching, for weaker students.

Left: Teo Wen Jue, 14, studies at Bedok View Secondary.

### POST-SECONDARY

- New programme in ITEs for students who score less than two N-level passes.
- Will admit 180 students for a start.

Source: MOE

ST PHOTOS: LAU FOOK KONG AND MUGILAN RAJASEGERAN

but who still need extra coaching. In the primary and secondary schools alone, about 60,000 students will benefit from the new schemes every year.

For English, students will receive extra coaching from specially trained teachers in small groups of about 10.

The numeracy programme will focus on helping weak students understand concepts through the use of learning aids.

"It is about providing the best opportunities for every child to succeed," he said, in response to MPs including Mr Lim Biow Chuan (Mountbatten), Dr Lily Neo (Tanjong Pagar GRC), Ms Irene Ng (Tampines GRC) and Ms Low Yen Ling (Chua Chu Kang GRC) who had spoken earlier on help for weaker students.

He also put before the House some fundamental questions on the future of education, including those raised during the Our Singapore Conversation - such as the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) and streaming.

Mr Heng said that on PSLE, the questions to ask concern how to maintain the rigorous standards and allocate secondary places without an objective benchmark like the national exam.

On streaming, the issue is if every child can learn at his own pace without streaming, and if schools would become even less diverse if they did not have students from various academic streams.

In many respects, the education system reflects societal norms and expectations, he said.

"We cannot have broader definitions of success in education without our society accepting broader definitions of success in life."

Ms Catherine Teoh, 30, an administrative executive and divorcee with young children, hopes a government-run kindergarten will open near her Jurong home.

She said her elder daughter, who is in Kindergarten 2, is struggling. "I cannot afford to send them for tuition or phonics or speech and drama classes, so I worry if they are going to fall far behind... I feel an MOE-run kindergarten will be good and give them a leg up."

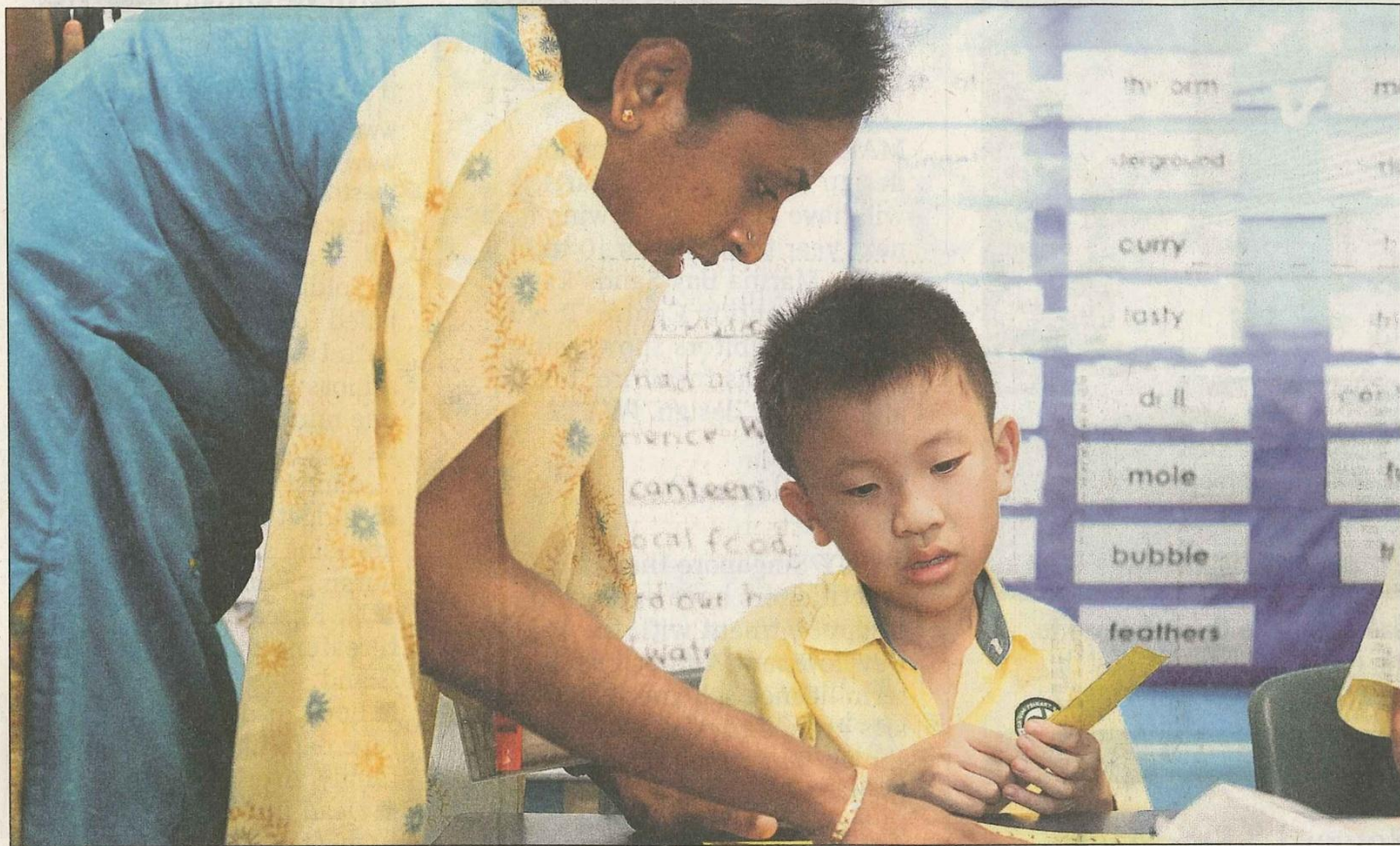
sandra@sph.com.sg

SEE TOP OF THE NEWS A2-3, OPINION A28 & FORUM A31  
MORE ON BUDGET DEBATE: HOME B4-6

The Straits Times

18 March 2013





**Mrs Sangeetha Sivanesan guiding Evan in a class exercise. He is gaining more confidence in speaking up and enjoys English more.** ST PHOTO: KEVIN LIM

setting.

Madam Lee said that in less than half a year, she noticed a big improvement in Evan. He no

longer hides behind her when they meet people, and initiates conversations more.

Said Evan: "I'm trying my

best not to be shy and I like English more because I can speak better now."

**STACEY CHIA**

# The Bilingual Child

**80%**  
**English**



**20%**  
**Chinese**



# Reversing language shift

- Language shift: community increasingly adopts a language of wider circulation;  
local language declines
- This process can be reversed (Fishman 1991):  
revitalization of local language
- A successful case: Hawaiian  
‘Language nests’: immersion preschools





# Hawaiian immersion preschool

**Pūnana Leo o Kaua'i**

a Hawaiian Language Immersions Preschool  
& Family Based Center



**"E Ola Ka 'Ōlelo Hawai'i"**  
**"The Hawaiian language shall live"**

# Singapore: 'Chinese-only' approach in private tuition





# How to reverse language shift

- Medium of Instruction (MOI) policy
- Option A: immersion in preschools (Hawaiian model)
- Option B: Bilingual Education (BE) in preschools (experimental model)

# Why promote early bilingualism?

Cognitive advantages

↑ creativity

↑ mental flexibility

↑ sensitivity to language,  
metalinguistic awareness

↑ Executive control:  
attention, selection,  
inhibition, monitoring  
ability to ignore distracting  
information and focus on  
the real objectives

(Bialystok and Barac 2013)

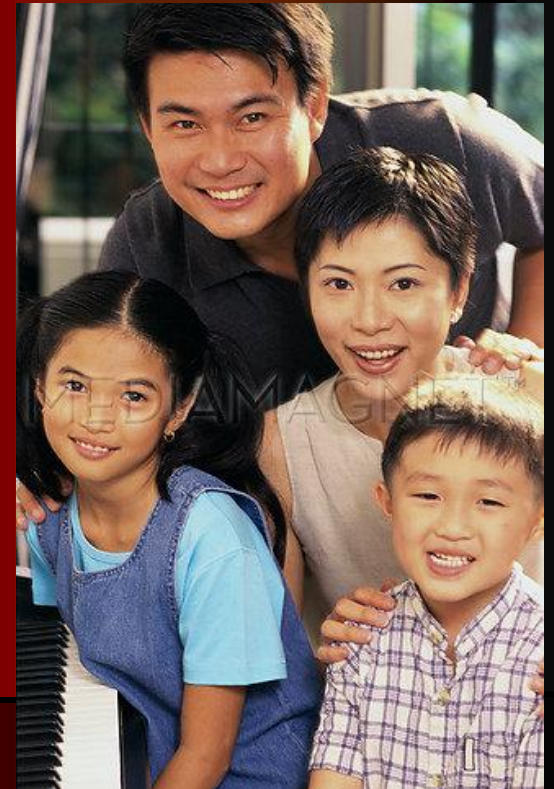


# Family Language Policies



One Parent  
One Language

One Parent  
Two Languages



# Key to success in nurturing bilingualism in early childhood

- Quality of input: Quality of dual input can be assured by having speakers of each language **consistently** address children (in the home) or teach (in the preschools) in their native language
- Quantity of input: **regularly** expose children to the target languages in the home; by teaching content classes in both languages a balance of input can be maintained



# Children from one parent-one language families

- Hong Kong Bilingual Child Language Corpus: now features 7 children from 1 parent-1 language families and 2 from 1 parent-2 language families.
- 6 children's longitudinal development in Cantonese and English analyzed in our book *The Bilingual Child* (2007: Cambridge University Press)

# 7 bilingual children in CHILDES



Timmy



Sophie



Alicia



Kathryn



Llywelyn



Charlotte



Janet

# Achievements of bilingual children

- Success stories: in 3-4 years, children are able to understand and speak English and Cantonese fluently: 2 lexicons, 2 grammars,
- Ability to switch between languages:  
‘見人講人話, 見鬼講鬼話’  
‘see human talk human speech, see devil talk devil speech’
- Acquiring 2 languages at the same time is not a burden and there is no confusion because the languages are clearly differentiated.
- Australian case study of Mandarin and English  
(Chang-Smith 2010, Qi 2011)

# Bilingual identity

Mother: Daddy hai6 me1 jan4 aa3? 爹哋係咩人呀  
'What's Daddy's nationality?'

Child: Ing1 gok3 jan4 英国人 'English person'

Mother: Jing1 gok3 jan4 英国人 'English person'

Mother: Ing1 gok3 jan4 'English person'

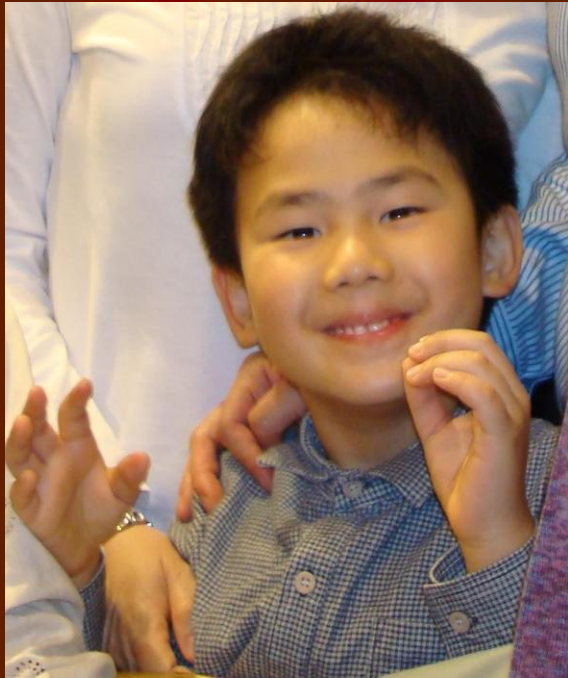
Maa1 mi4 hai6 zung1 gok3 jan4. 妈咪係中国人  
'Mummy is a Chinese person.'

Mother: Timmy hai6 me1 jan4 aa3? Timmy 係咩人呀  
'What about Timmy?'

Child: Bilingual! (Timmy 2;00;14)



# Children from one parent-two language families



Kasen 2;4 -4;0



Darren 2;0 -3:8

- Children with both parents speaking Cantonese as L1 and English as L2
- An increasingly common situation in Hong Kong

# Children from one parent-two languages family

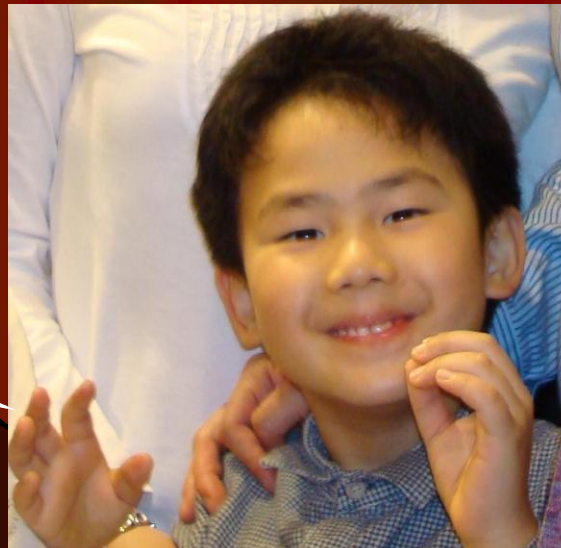
- Kasen: recorded from age 2;04- 4;00
- Darren: recorded from age 1;07-3;11
- Parents are native speakers of Cantonese who speak English as a second language.
- Children are addressed in both languages with varying degrees of code-mixing.



# Different types of input conditions

- Both one-parent-one language and one-parent-two language families provide support for development of early bilingualism
- With **consistent** and **frequent** exposure to dual input, children are able to develop bilingualism in the first few years of their life.

I speak Chinese



I speak English

# Code-mixing by Kasen in Cantonese and English contexts

- What about language mixing?
- Kasen's code-mixing is systematic: consistently more mixed utterances in Cantonese contexts than in English contexts.

CHI: 我 drink 囉

I drink SFP

'I drink obviously'

INV: 你飲呢個嘅? (Kasen 2;07)

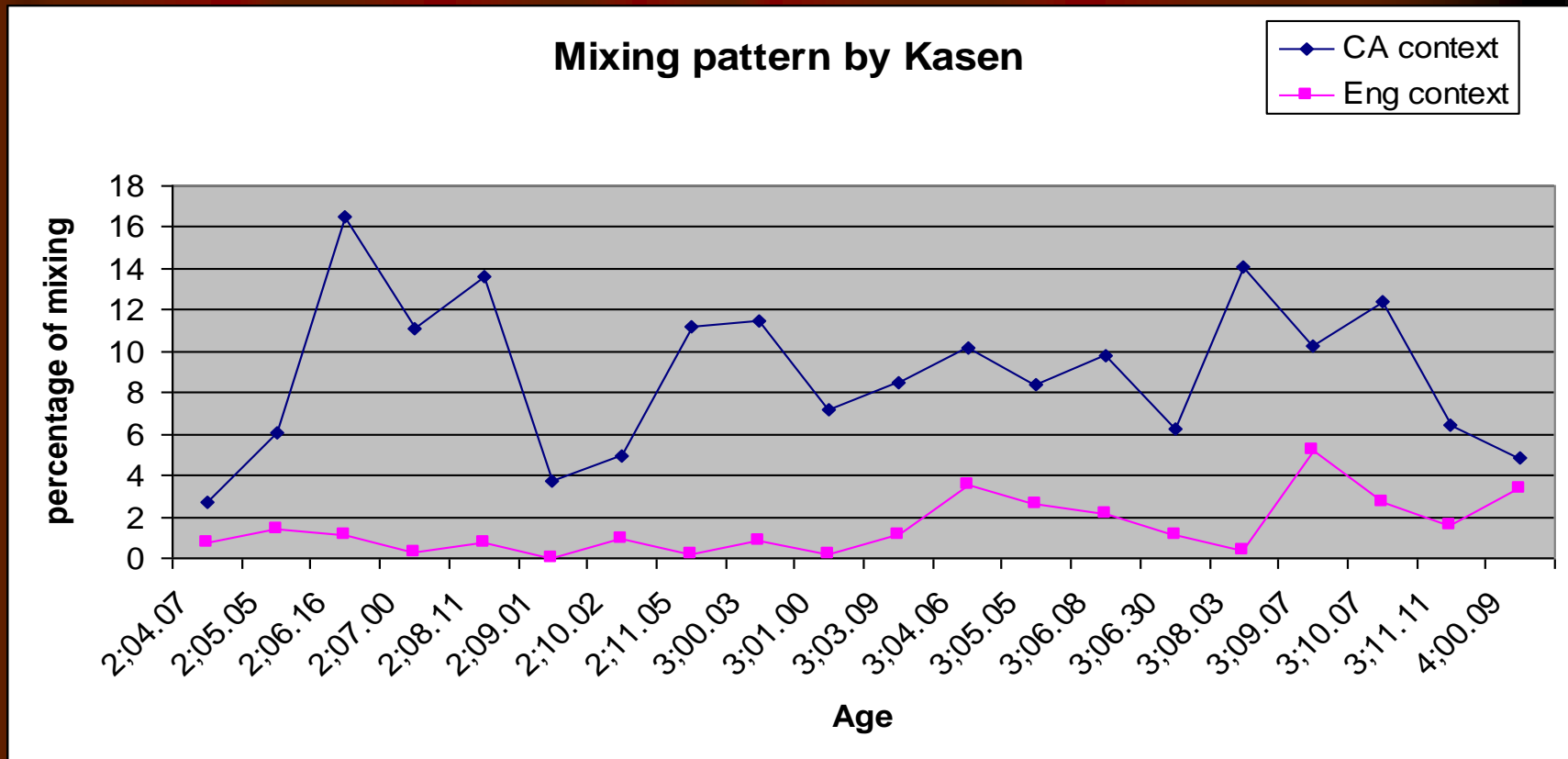
'You drink this?'

- Mixed utterances are rare in English contexts:

CHI: Let me show you 呀

CHI: 呢度喇 (Kasen 3;03;09)

# Code-mixing by Kasen in Cantonese and English contexts



# Implications for preschools

- (How) can the one parent-one language be recreated in preschools?
- Two language models in the classroom:  
one teacher speaking English, one Mandarin  
example: the Caterpillar's Cove Child  
Development and Study Centre
- Both languages activated: bilingual mode

# Bilingual mode

- Language mode (Grosjean 2000, 2013):  
a bilingual can operate in monolingual or bilingual ‘mode’
- Monolingual mode: one language activated
- Bilingual mode: two languages activated

# The bilingual's language modes

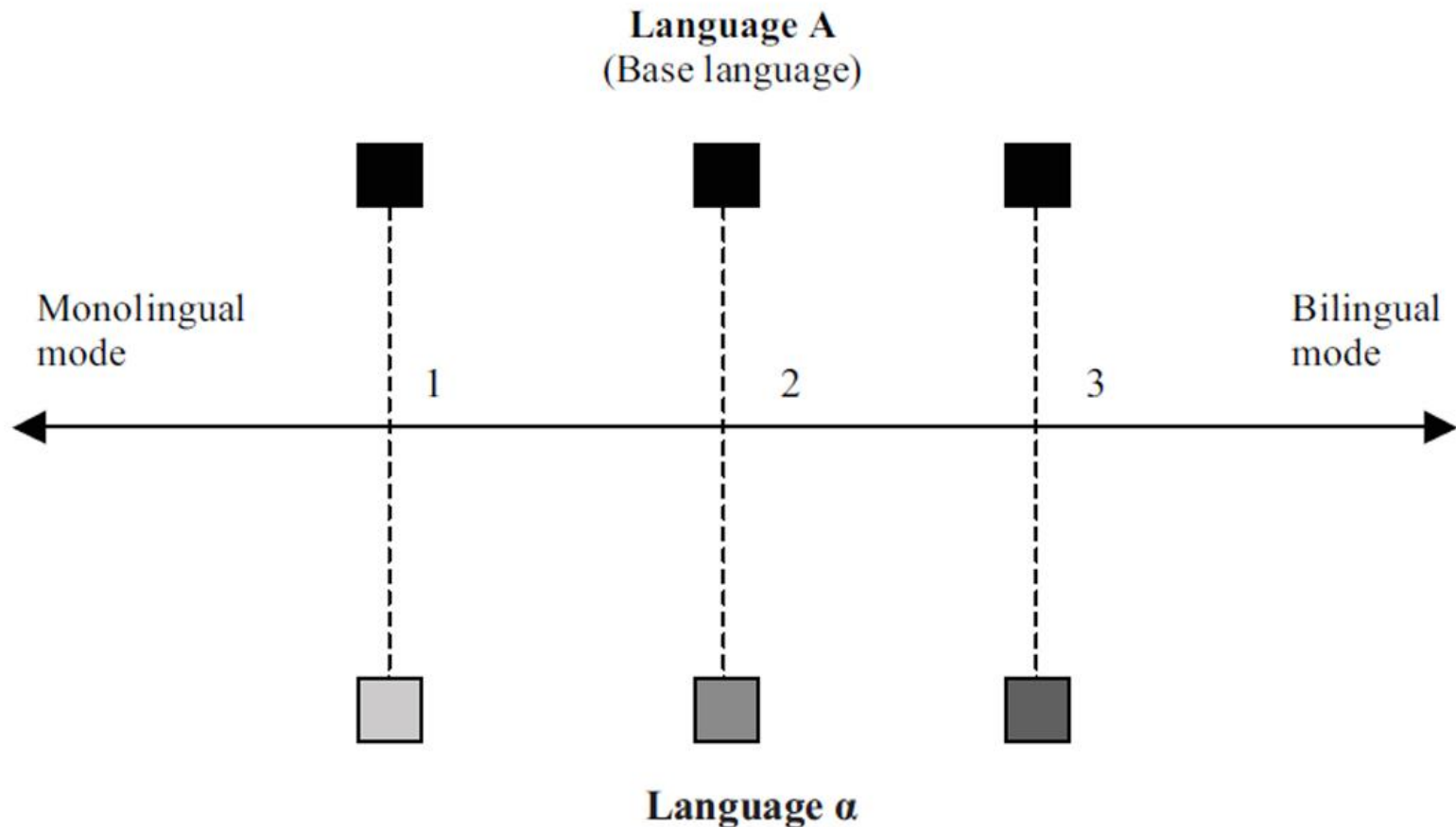


Figure 6.1: Visual representation of the language mode continuum. Figure adapted from Grosjean (2000).



# Singaporean child Ryan

- Case study of a Singaporean child Ryan based on video recordings from 1;6 to 2;9 (Koh and Luo 2013)
- Mother and father: both speak English and Chinese to Ryan from birth
- Code-switching from one language to the other occurs frequently
- Child's switching reflects parents' switching



Mum: What is that?

# Ryan as bilingual child in Singapore

- Ryan was able to code-switch effectively and effortlessly.
- Ryan showed meta-linguistic awareness through translation equivalents and manipulation of words and sentences in nursery rhymes and stories.
- ‘Foreign accent’ was noted in Ryan’s Mandarin utterances.

Child: Panda 睡觉

Panda shuijiao

‘Panda is sleeping.’

Mother : Panda在睡觉。Panda 华语 叫

Panda zai shuijiao. Panda huayu jiao

什么？你去香港看到什么？Panda. Ryan,  
shemme? Ni qu xianggang kang dao shenmme  
Panda 华语叫什么？

‘Panda is sleeping. What is panda in Chinese?

What did you see in Hong Kong?

Child : 熊猫 xiongmao ‘panda’ (Ryan, 1;7)



# Singapore child Ryan

- Mother: Duck. Duck 华语叫什么？  
‘What is duck in Chinese?’
  - Mother: Parrot. Parrot 华语叫鸚，鸚什么？  
‘Parrot in Chinese is *ying* what?’
  - Child：鸚鵡  
yingmu  
‘parrot’
- Prompting in Mandarin indicates weaker language

# Implications for preschool teachers

- Awareness of language development: how language develops over time from infancy to early childhood; code-mixing as natural part of bilingual development
- Adult's role in supporting development
- Learning and teaching that address the youngest age group
- Bilingual education means teaching *in* each language, not teaching a language!



# Conclusions

- In the Chinese context, developing competence in Chinese along with English is important in preserving the cultural heritage and identity.
- The bilingual child will benefit from the host of cognitive advantages of early bilingualism.
- The child is equipped to acquire two languages effortlessly in the first few years of life which is the best time for language acquisition.

# Recommendations

- Immersion and/or bilingual preschools can foster early bilingualism.
- More pilot programmes are needed to develop these educational models in the Chinese context.
- The challenge we pose for the educators is to for schools, families and researchers to work together to nurture balanced bilingualism.



# Acknowledgments: thank you

- Ng Bee Chin, K. K. Luke and organizers of Outreach Workshop and *The Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism*
- Lee Cher Leng, Tan Chee Lay and Phua Chiew Pheng
- Members of our research team at CBRC
- This research was fully supported by General Research Fund (GRF) grants and “From Lexicon to Syntax in Childhood Bilingualism” RGC Ref. no. CUHK 453808
- Singapore friends: Ryan, Jiang Meiru, Grace Koh
- The Caterpillar’s Cove Child Development and Study Centre in Singapore: Geraldine Zuzarte and Cynthia Tan

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